

Tennessee Valley resident Clayton McQuay shares his memories of America's

# DAY OF INFAMY

by Leslie Gray and Jacque Gray

"Mac, Mac, is that you?" Harold Oleson shouted through the black smoke, the horrendous noise, and the devastation. His friend Clayton "Mac" McQuay was all but invisible. "Come get me Harold!" Clayton McQuay desperately shouted back at his friend on the lifeboat. McQuay gasped for air as he struggled to hold on to the slick wing of an upside-down seaplane that had been pitched into the harbor after the explosion. He was covered with pitch black fuel oil, and his friend was able to recognize him only by the sound of his voice. The fire was twenty feet away and getting closer. Oleson worked frantically to get to McQuay in time to save him.

First Class Petty Officer Harold Oleson clutched his friend's wrists to pull him onto the lifeboat, but Clayton kept slipping from his grasp. He repeatedly fell back into the oily black mess. "Hook your fingers!" Clayton shouted. His life depended on it. Both men hooked their fingers down toward the palms of their hands and locked them with each other. Oleson snaked his friend over into the lifeboat. But First Class Petty Officer Clayton McQuay had not been alone in the oily water. Hundreds of brave men were desperately fighting to stay above the toxic waves as well. It was shortly after 8 a.m. on Sunday, December 7, 1941. They were in the water next to the sinking USS Oklahoma, in an area known as Battleship Row. Thousands had become the unwilling victims of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Clayton McQuay graduated from high school in Charlotte, North Carolina in the spring of 1934. It was during the Depression, and good jobs were tough to find. A



recruiter visiting his school talked him into enlisting in the Navy. Twenty-one dollars a month and a steady job sounded sweet.

After training in Norfolk, Virginia, he was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, a 583-foot-long battleship that had been christened on March 23, 1914. Gunner's mate Clayton McQuay served with the crew as they traveled to England, Sweden, Majorca Island, Gibraltar, Spain, and France. The USS Oklahoma transported approximately one-hundred Americans, evacuated from Spain during the Spanish Revolution, to safety in France.

In December 1941, 26-year-old Clayton McQuay — a ringer for movie star Cary Grant — reveled in the balmy Hawaiian breezes when he wasn't on duty at the deck of the battleship. The U.S. Armed Forces were anticipating and preparing to fight the Japanese, but the opinion was that ships would be somewhat safe from torpedo attack in the 40-foot shallow waters of Pearl Harbor. The

military strategists hadn't counted on a slight modification the Japanese made to their torpedo fins, which had previously been ineffective in depths less than 75 feet. The Japanese had been preparing for nearly a year to attack Pearl Harbor.

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On Saturday, December 6, the crew of the USS Oklahoma spent the day firing guns and training. McQuay, as one of the turret captains, was firing a 14" gun from one of the ten gun turrets. After a long day of training, the crew planned to spend Sunday preparing for the Monday morning inspection by the Admiral.

By early Sunday morning the guns were being cleaned, hatches were open, and everywhere sailors were busy scrubbing and polishing. Other than the work

ahead, it would be just another perfect day in paradise.

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The second torpedo slammed into the hull and exploded. Forty Japanese torpedo planes and forty-nine level bombers launched a full-scale attack on Pearl Harbor — and the Americans were unprepared. While the ships feebly fought the enemy with antiaircraft fire, bombs whistled from the sky, and torpedoes fell to the water with deadly accuracy. As soon as the second torpedo hit the port side of the USS Oklahoma, the great ship began to list.

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*Chief Petty Officer Clayton McQuay inspects his crew*

most of the other sailors: he was too busy doing exactly what he had spent seven years training for to worry about dying that day. Men scrambled to their battle stations — the engine rooms, guns, and damage control posts.

Smoke billowed into the sky in angry columns of ugly black as the Japanese attack planes kept coming and kept coming like a swarm of angry hornets. Three waves over the next two hours continued to wreak destruction. Bombs whistled down and landed with sickening explosions, obliterating everything around them.

Nearby, the USS Arizona had taken a direct hit in the powder magazine, setting off over a million pounds of gunpowder. The mighty battleship exploded into flames and choking black smoke. She broke in two and sank in less than nine minutes.



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Sadly, 1,177 brave American crewmen of the Arizona perished as a result of that awful explosion.

Other battleships along Ford Island were hit as well. Besides the Oklahoma and the Arizona, the West Virginia sank, and the California, Maryland, Tennessee, Nevada, and the flagship, the Pennsylvania, were all crippled. Of the 394 aircraft on the island, 323 were totally destroyed or damaged.

Clayton McQuay saw the low-flying Japanese planes as they swooped down from the sky. Some were so close he could see the pilots laughing at the devastation. Clayton lost count of the horrendous torpedo hits after the first four. The ship's twisting metal screeched as men tried to clamber out to safety, gasping for precious air.

As the mortally-wounded battleship capsized port-side into the frigid water, a final order was shouted: "Abandon ship!" Clayton jumped into the water, now covered with thousands of gallons of fuel oil. In seven to eight minutes, the ship had capsized after having taken nine torpedo hits. Water rushed into the ship through the open wounds, trapping crewmen inside the maze of halls and compartments. One hole was a gaping 70 feet long. Everywhere, sailors were desperately trying to save their ship, their comrades, and them-

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Two seaplanes had been on the deck of the USS Oklahoma. One was pitched upside-down in the water, and Clayton McQuay was among the twenty or so men who struggled to hold onto the slippery wing, hoping they would soon be saved. They were all covered with black oil, stinging their eyes and nostrils. Here and there, fires raged in the flammable oil, now floating everywhere in the once-beautiful harbor, consuming everything and everyone in its path. All they could do was hope to be rescued before they were burned alive. Others were not so lucky. The stranded men looked silently over at the wreck of the mighty Oklahoma, her mast now sinking into the mud.

Harold Oleson pulled as many survivors as he could onto the lifeboat. The men got to the fuel docks on Ford Is-

land and took cover under the tables in the mess hall. The whole island vibrated with every new explosion. It would take days to get them selves free of the awful oily mess that covered them. It was the least of their worries.

Even as the Japanese continued their aerial attack, men climbed up onto the capsized ship with cutting torches and immediately set about freeing their comrades. Several of the trapped men were killed by the acetylene torches used by their liberators. After that disheartening discovery, their rescuers used air chisels. From deep inside the cavernous ship, desperate men hammered out "SOS" with dog wrenches. The rescue efforts would continue for two more days, eventually freeing 31 men. For far too many, though, help came too late.

Immediately, Clayton McQuay and Harold Oleson were assigned to a cruiser, the USS Helena. The Helena had taken a hit in the fire room, killing 37 men. Clayton got there in time to see the grim removal of bodies.

In spite of the surprise attack, nine Japanese fighters, five torpedo planes, and fifteen dive bombers were shot from the sky. Japanese Commander Mitsuo Fuchida had worn a red shirt on the mission in the event he was shot. The shirt would camouflage his spilled blood and not discourage the rest of his crew. He survived.

Over 2,395 American servicemen and civilians were killed at the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Another 1,178 were wounded. Over 400 of those casualties were aboard the USS Oklahoma.

On March 8, 1943, the USS Oklahoma was uprighted using shore-based electric winches. It was then that a terrible discovery was

made. Four men trapped in the watertight compartments of the storeroom had survived for nineteen days after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They had even changed into their winter uniforms, and kept a calendar that documented the desperate days until they perished.

*see Valley*

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months later, she was pulled by a tugboat towards the coast of Washington. Enroute, a storm

sank the ship, nearly taking the tugboat in the process. The line was "cut" and the tugboat was spared. It was an undignified ending for the mighty ship.

The Utah and Arizona remain where they sank, permanent memorials to the men who may be lost, but will never be forgotten.

Clayton McQuay spent twenty years in the Navy and retired as a Chief Petty Officer. Harold Oleson, his friend from Belle Plain, Kansas, died later in the war while serving on a cruiser. His vessel had been hit, and he was helping to extinguish a fire on deck, trying vainly to keep the flames away from the bombs and other munitions stored there. But the crew's efforts were insufficient and one bomb ex-

ploded, blowing off Oleson's legs. Another brave American was dead. Oleson's death continues to be a painful loss for Mr. McQuay.

Clayton McQuay is nearly 87 years old. He and his wife Frances are prominent residents of the Big Cove community in Madison County, Alabama. Clayton looks much younger than his years, and he still bears traces of his resemblance to the late Cary Grant. He still gets emotional when he remembers his lost friends, and perhaps even more so, as the years go by.

No words or gesture will ever adequately convey the profound sense of gratitude we Americans feel for the brave men and women who fought for our country. We can never compensate for their tremendous sacrifices, but we can begin by saying a simple "thank you."

*The End.*

## Didja Know?

Because of fears that the Japanese, who had attacked Pearl Harbor less than a month earlier, might attack California, the Rose Bowl game of 1942 between Oregon State and Duke University was moved east to Duke's hometown in Durham, North Carolina. It didn't, however, help the home team: Oregon won, 20-16.

## ABANDON SHIP!

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